

Teodora Matei

Living candles – A Mystery Novel from Romania

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Teodora Matei

# LIVING CANDLES

## A Mystery Novel from Romania



in some of the milder drugs, all of which shattered the domestic peace and quiet that he had become used to. Meanwhile, his daughter Miruna had taken advantage of the tense atmosphere at home to get into the habit of increasingly frequently asking for money for clothes and makeup.

Then Andreea had made an appearance in his life, and his world had been rocked to its foundations, alternately lifting him to new heights of delight and down to the depths of despair, with hardly a moment between one extreme and the next.

'Boss, we're here,' Sorin said, waking Iordan from his thoughts.

'Thanks. See you on Monday morning, same time, same place,' Iordan said over his shoulder, heading for the narrow alley leading to the block of flats where his apartment and family were waiting for him.

'I'll be there,' his deputy assured him, in a hurry to get home and take a shower after the heat of the day.

## CHAPTER ONE

*The white, naked body hung upside down, arms taped to its sides, its ankles tied with rope. The red hair almost swept the floor, like a paintbrush in an invisible hand, and small pools of brownish blood collected beneath it.*

Mrs Marcu put down her bags of groceries at the top of the stairs, took off her glasses, wiped them clean with a corner of her housecoat, then started counting steps on the way down into the basement where she intended to put the jars she had prepared for the winter.

One, two, three, four ... fourteen. She felt her way along the wall with the index finger of her right hand and pressed the switch. Behind the thick mesh grille, a feeble forty watt light bulb came to life. It was just bright enough for her to find her way around the rough wooden shelves. She opened the padlock and



once again silently thanked the new superintendent for fixing the power, almost for free but not quite, before she turned around to pick up the burden she had struggled to carry.

She used the palm of her hand to wipe away a couple of cobwebs before carefully stacking the jars. The stewed aubergine had to be up there on the top shelf, because she would only use those when winter came. The pickled peppers were next and below them the fruit compote and jams on the third row, easily reached when she sent one of her grandchildren to fetch something from the basement. She took a step back, admiring her handiwork. These were the times when she no longer felt the pain in her arms, back or legs, admiring the full shelves and the certainty of a winter with a well-stocked larder. She was alone and retired, used to hard times and little money.

A shock slammed her against the wall. She watched the light bulb swing furiously as if there had been an earthquake. Narrow threads of dust cascaded from the cracked ceiling. Mrs Marcu crossed her hands against her chest, feeling her heart racing, as she tried her best to remember whether or not she had taken her blood pressure tablets that morning.

She glanced at her larder, pushed back into place a couple of jars that had slid towards the edge, and waited for the aftershock of the earthquake, or

whatever it had been. But all she could hear was a faint metallic clanking, and distant screams.

Eventually, she gathered her courage to make her way up from the basement. She mumbled to herself, irritated that her glasses had become fogged. She wiped them very rarely, only when the world appeared hazy. She hurried to get to the light, to where there would be people, certain that she didn't want to die down there, buried among the pickled vegetables.

She took two more steps, then she stopped. The door of the store room belonging to Minescu, her neighbour from the third floor, hung from its hinges. She didn't even want to think about the amount of dust and dirt that would come out of that grumpy old man's store room. He couldn't even be bothered to clean his apartment, she thought, and stopped. She stood frozen in front of the metal door where a chain padlock hung.

She had forgotten to press the switch on the way out, and the weak light now lit not only the way up to the ground floor, but also the interior of the room across the hall, where the body of a young woman was swinging gently, hanging downwards, describing diminishing circles.

The body was pale, naked and hanging by its feet. The blast had loosened the beam to which the ankles had been tied with rope, the red hair almost touching



the floor where drops of dark of blood pooled in the dust. In the semi-darkness, the sight resembled a candle lit for a satanic ritual.

\*

Mrs Marcu rushed for the exit, trying desperately to hold back a scream. She threw herself into the arms of a woman who had pulled a bathrobe over a long night gown with a ripped hem. She rested her head on the woman's shoulder, ignoring the strong smell of sweat.

'Oh, Valerica, what a terrible thing to happen! What...?'

Valerica pushed her curlers out of sight under her headscarf and patted Mrs Marcu on the back.

'It's all right, Mrs Marcu, it's over now. Look, the firemen are coming, and the police, too.'

Mrs Marcu managed to regain her balance.

'Not here, not here,' she whispered, her hands crossed over her chest. 'Over there...'

She pointed towards the entrance she had come from. Thick black smoke poured from a ground floor window, crawling lazily up the building's newly-painted wall, out into the open like a predator in search of a meal. It was only then that the old woman saw the other people gathered in groups of two and

three, looking in terror at the black smoke gathering above the neighbourhood and at the man who had thrown himself out the window. He was rolling on the ground, screeching in pain and holding the scorched palms of his hands in front of him.

'Thieves! Look what they did to me! Look! And look at my home!'

He continued to curse his imaginary enemies, and then seemed to remember the stinging pain of his burned hands, screaming and waving them above his head, hardly noticing the people around him and pausing to wipe his blackened face in the crook of his elbow.

'Mrs Marcu, this one will keep going until he blows us all up,' the woman in the bathrobe hissed sharply to her neighbour who had regained her breath, leaning against the boot of a car.

'He's crazy. They should have picked him up long ago, but they say he's not dangerous. Well, if his mother were still alive, God rest her soul ... She could calm him down,' she chattered. 'Well, never mind him, do you have any idea what I saw down there?'

\*

The squealing tyres of cars from the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations interrupted her, followed by a fire engine and an ambulance, and



several policemen appeared from around the side of the building, ordering all the tenants to evacuate the area.

People backed away carefully, watching the firemen as they went to work. Only Dorel Vlădeanu, the neighbourhood's resident crazy guy, continued to yell at them from where he sat on the grass. An ambulance medic tried to approach, but backed off in the face of the torrent of curses and yells. Eventually he managed to lead Dorel away onto the pavement, giving him a notebook and a pen to scribble down his complaints to the government. He agreed to have first aid administered to his burns, as the cheerful medic convinced him that otherwise he wouldn't be able to exert his rights as a citizen to protest against corrupt politicians.

The policemen made sure that Dorel Vlădeanu was taken to hospital, and then they took statements from the eye witnesses. Everybody talked about hearing a loud bang, about the smoke coming out from the broken window and about door blown off its hinges. The investigators' suspicions were confirmed by the firemen who had extinguished the smouldering furniture in the ground floor apartment; another of Dorel's homemade bomb experiments.

After he had lost his job and after his mother's death, his mental condition had become increasingly

unstable. He refused to stay in hospital, where he was not allowed to communicate with his neighbours, in the firm belief that they were involved in a plot to have him thrown out into the street. Ironically, it was his unsuccessful attempt at a bomb that put them on the street.

Panait on the fourth floor, a retired bus driver, had threatened to sue the city authorities and the local council if they couldn't get rid of the crazy guy. The policemen kept saying that all the appropriate legal measures would be taken for citizens' safety, but Panait would only let himself be convinced when they asked him to give a statement explaining all the details of when Vlădeanu had become such a danger to the community around him.

Răzvan Bratu glanced at Dorel where he sat on the kerb and smiled as he saw how rapidly his words were filling the notebook's blank sheets. He could have read over his shoulder, but a discreet buzz from his smartphone prompted him to run a couple of yards in the supermarket's direction to throw a ball and catch a Pokemon. When he stretched his arm above his shoulder he realised that his tee shirt had lifted and that all he was wearing were his red boxer shorts, a winking devil's head adorning the back. At the same moment he heard the two old women leaning against his father's Logan and whispering.



‘What’s the matter, old lady, you’ve never seen undercrackers before?’ he jeered. ‘So I jumped out of bed. How do you think I go to sleep? In flannel pyjamas, like my grandpa?’

He stretched and raised his arms, feigning a yawn, grinning as he saw he had set the women muttering again. At seventeen it was no longer cool to climb the trees in front of the building and frighten the neighbours by throwing stuff through their kitchen windows. But you can give them the occasional shock by showing them how wonderful it is to be young and a little crazy.

Răzvan saw the TV broadcast vans, the reporters and camera crews rushing towards the building on Macilor Alley. He jumped over the low hedge to head them off and be the first one in front of the cameras, but was beaten to it by two old women in the parking lot with a scrawny reporter from a news station.

‘As real as me and you! A naked woman, hanging upside down, in Minescu’s storage room,’ Mrs Marcu whispered. ‘I’m going to wait for them to finish and I’m going to tell them,’ she said, wagging a finger at the team deep in conversation with some police officers from the Second Sector.

‘Mrs Marcu, you’re crazy! How could you keep it to yourself for so long? What if she’s not dead?’

Mrs Marcu’s knees buckled under the strain, that thought suddenly more shocking than the discovery of the body. She tried to stay on her feet, but found herself slowly collapsing onto the bonnet of Mr Bratu’s car, giving the young reporter the choice of either supporting the old lady or running to the scene with the cameraman at his heels.

‘Move it, girl. This is a scoop for us if there really is a body in the basement,’ a bony-faced cameraman muttered to another reporter whose high heels prevented her venturing into the cobbled alley.

‘A body in the basement?’ the girl yelled, and immediately clapped a hand over her mouth.

Răzvan decided that with the car’s plastic bumper and then soft earth to break her fall, Mrs Marcu wasn’t likely to be injured. He rushed past the ambulance and headed towards the parking lot. He managed to pass the two firemen rolling the hose they had used and reached the basement before anybody else.

The cameraman with the bony face appeared first, followed by two others from Antena 1 and ProTV. Young Răzvan decided that this was his moment of glory, determined to keep them at bay, wearing his red boxer shorts with the little devil on the back, hands on the hallway walls and blocking access to the store rooms.



'I'm not budging until the police arrive,' he yelled as loudly as he could, so that everyone outside could hear. 'This is a crime scene and you can't tamper with the evidence.'

He was proud of this line, one he had picked up from TV police dramas. All those hours spent watching one episode after another hadn't been wasted as he descended into fantasies of playing either the cop or the criminal.

'Get out of the way, boy,' threatened the bony man pointing the camera at him.

Seeing that there was no way to convince him, the cameraman kicked Răzvan's left shin.

'Help! ProTV are beating me up!' Răzvan yelled.

'Are you crazy? I haven't done anything,' growled Pro TV's representative who was already filming, keen to capture the fracas between the young man and his competition.

'And Antena 1! Help!' Răzvan yelped, and by this time a third cameraman from another station already had the whole incident in the can.

'Antena 1 fucks your mamma! Get the fuck out of my way,' he ordered, moving towards him.

Fortunately for Răzvan, from behind the three camera crews, a police officer from the nearby police

station appeared. It was a face he recognised, an officer who had once investigated a stolen car and had interviewed all of the neighbourhood kids – except for Răzvan who had been holed up at home with chicken pox at the time, reduced to watching from the window and phoning his friends to ask how the investigation was going. But now, this was his moment and he was determined to make the most of it.

'Get those the cameras out of here. I'm Chief Officer Pătrău from Unit Seven. What's going on here?'

'This shithead is taking the piss,' said the bony man.

'That idiot is the shithead, not me,' Răzvan shouted. 'And, officer, this guy hit me! He kicked me!'

'I didn't kick you, I just gave you a gentle push,' the cameraman retorted.

'You see? He admitted it,' Răzvan said triumphantly.

'Enough! Stop! I want to know what's going on here,' Pătrău shouted, drowning out the other voices as he stood squarely in front of the boy, hands on hips.

'I heard an old lady say there's a dead body in Minescu's cellar. I stopped these idiots from tampering with the crime scene. That's all.'

Pătrău nodded and tilted his head to one side as he wondered whether or not to believe the boy. He